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EL MALPAIS

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EL MALPAIS

Introduction

El Malpais lava field and neighboring public lands include 84,000 acres of cinder cones, lava tubes, ice caves, sculptured sandstone formations and pine forests — a beautiful, if chaotically jumbled piece of wild America protected and preserved in its natural condition since 1974. Administered by the Bureau of Land Management, El Malpais (the badlands) is the historic Spanish name given to the lava field, and in view of the brutally rugged nature of the terrain it is an accurate description. The area is located in west-central New Mexico south of the city of Grants and may be reached via State Highway 53 and State Road 117, south of Interstate 40.

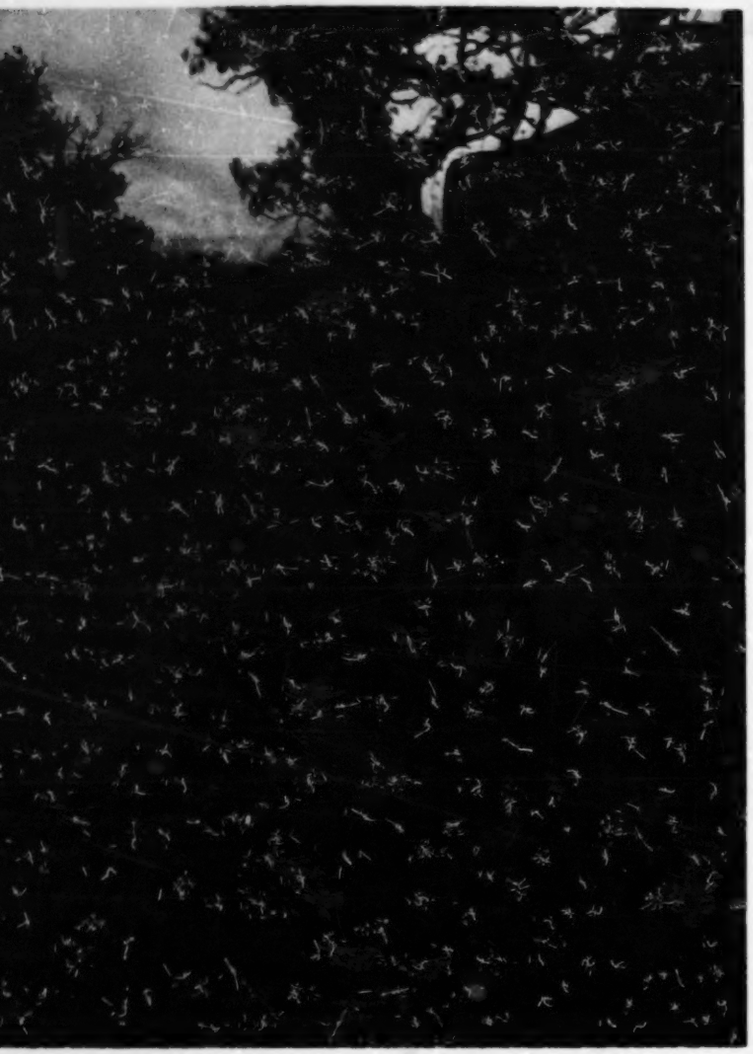
Bounded by high sandstone bluffs on the east, and by the appropriately named Chain of Craters on the west, El Malpais is one of the most outstanding examples of volcanic landscape in the continental United States. Recent volcanic topography of this magnitude can be compared with that found in Hawaii and Japan. El Malpais consists of four distinct lava flows which were spewed over the McCarty's Valley at different times within the last 3,000 years. Based upon archaeological evidence the most recent flows have been dated at less than one thousand years in age and Indian legends talk about a river of fire covering fields their ancestors tilled.

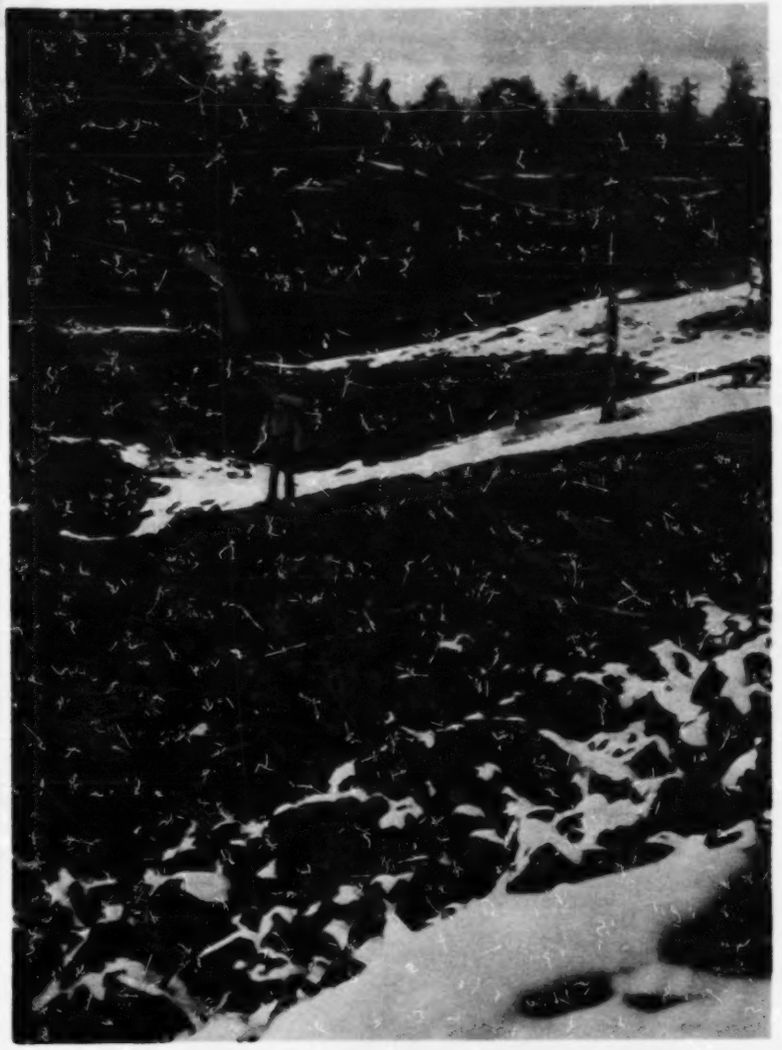
History

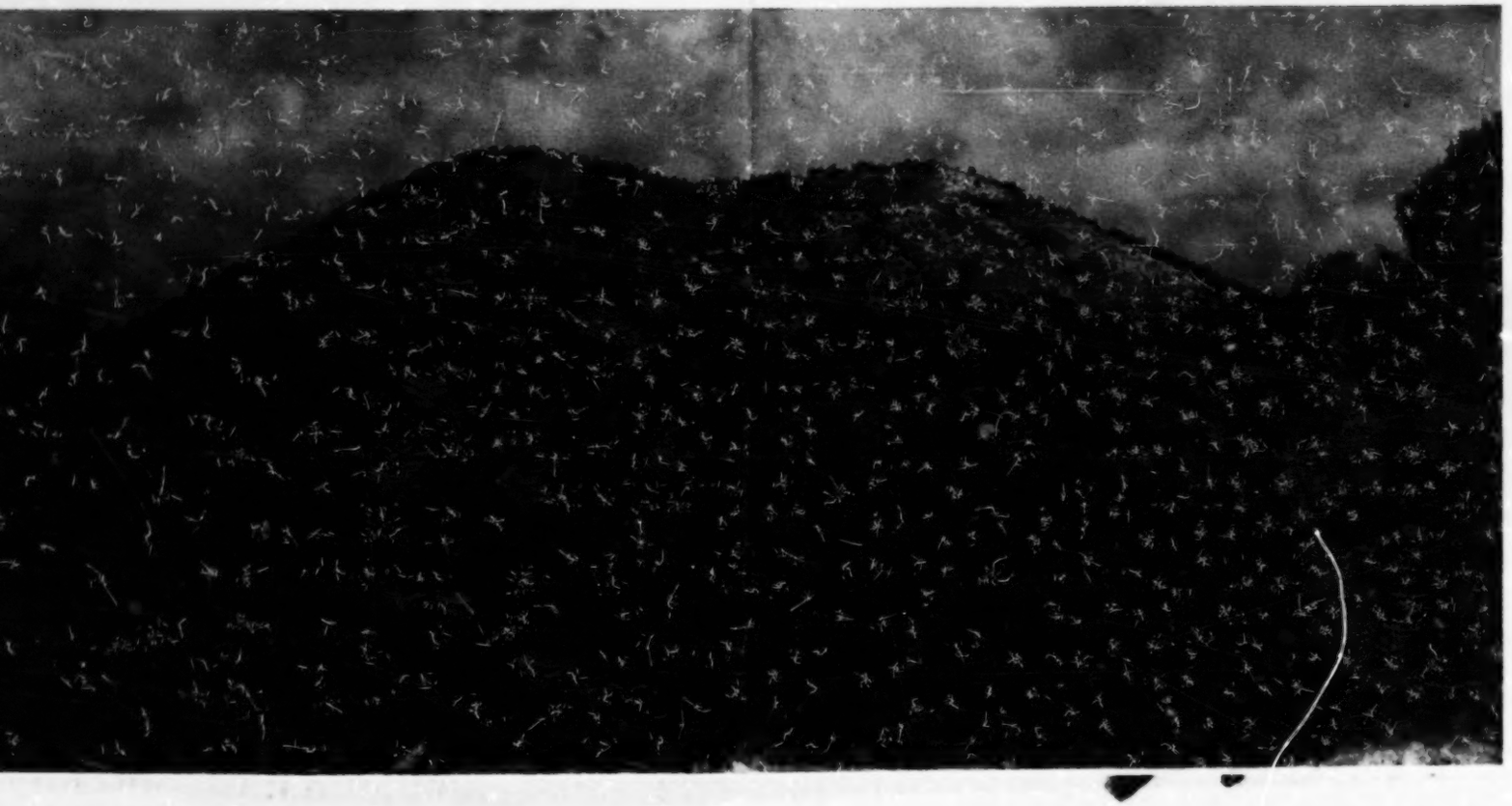
The area in the vicinity of El Malpais may have been inhabited since Paleo-Indian times, about eight to twelve thousand years ago. A large population of permanent village dwellers settled the area from about 800 A.D. to 1400 A.D. These ancestors of modern Pueblo Indians were known as Anasazi, from the Navajo word meaning "the ancient ones". In the fertile valleys adjacent to the lava field, these agricultural people grew corn, squash, and beans. They also crafted exquisitely beautiful pottery with intricate black and white geometric designs. The years between 1200 A.D. and 1400 A.D. represent the high point of cultural development with the construction of large fortified towns on mesa tops to the east of El Malpais. One of these is Acoma Pueblo located 30 miles from the lava field. Part of the Acoma Indian Reservation, Acoma Pueblo is considered one of the oldest continually inhabited settlements in the United States.

The first Europeans known to traverse El Malpais were Captain Hernando de Alvarado and his companion, Fray Juan Padilla, in the year 1540. Along with a body of soldiers, animals and provisions, they were sent by Spanish Conquistador Coronado to explore eastward from Zuni Pueblo. When Alvarado crossed El Malpais he found it to be a great impediment to travel and he made emphatic remarks on the roughness of the terrain. Traveling 75 miles, they arrived at Acoma Pueblo. Coronado and his main party skirted the lava, as did subsequent Spanish expeditions and the later American explorers and settlers.

Raiding by Navajos was a problem in the area until after the Civil War when Army troops and volunteers under the command of Kit Carson defeated the Navajo at Canyon de Chelly. This defeat almost completely ended the threat of raids. The area was then homesteaded and ranching rapidly became an important activity. Sheep, which had been introduced into the area during the Spanish Colonial period, became the primary grazing animal in El Malpais. With the increase of







sheep ranching, Navajo herders were employed and many eventually settled in the area.

In the late 1800's cattle operations began to expand in the vicinity of El Malpais. A major factor in the growth of cattle ranching was the influence of the Mormon Church. Missions were established in western New Mexico and these assisted in expanding cattle ranching operations. Ranching has continued to be an important activity in the region and is still a major economic factor.

Natural Features

At the Sandstone Bluffs Overlook, 10 miles south of interstate 40 along State Road 117, you can experience the awesome expanse of El Malpais. Here the sky, sandstone and lava meet.

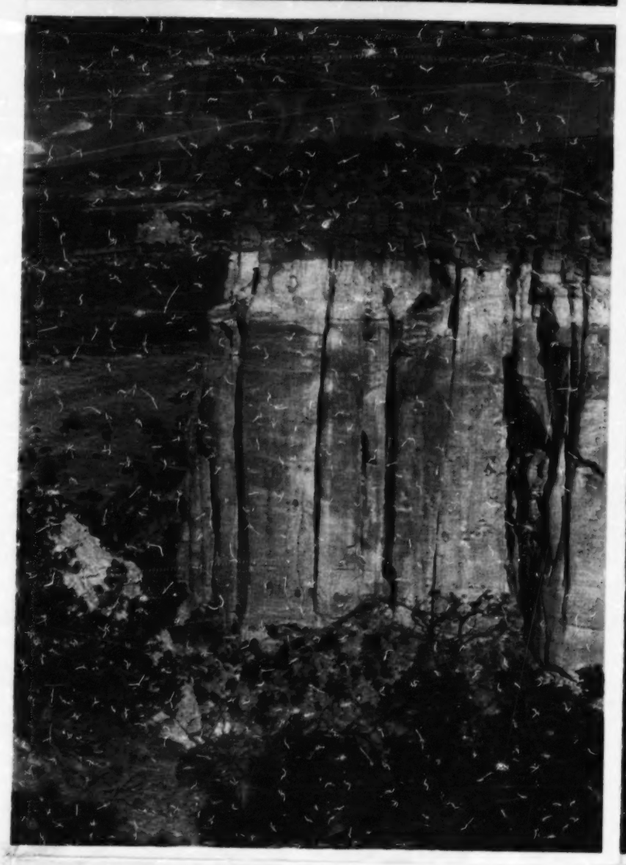
The Overlook is part of the sandstone and rimrock country of Cebollita Mesa that defines the eastern boundary of the lava field. The delicately colored sandstone formations have been shaped by wind and water into monumental forms. The largest natural arch in New Mexico and other smaller arches can be seen among the cliffs along 117. Some of these cliffs rise 500 feet in smooth, unbroken faces, while others have weathered into a maze of amphitheaters and columns.

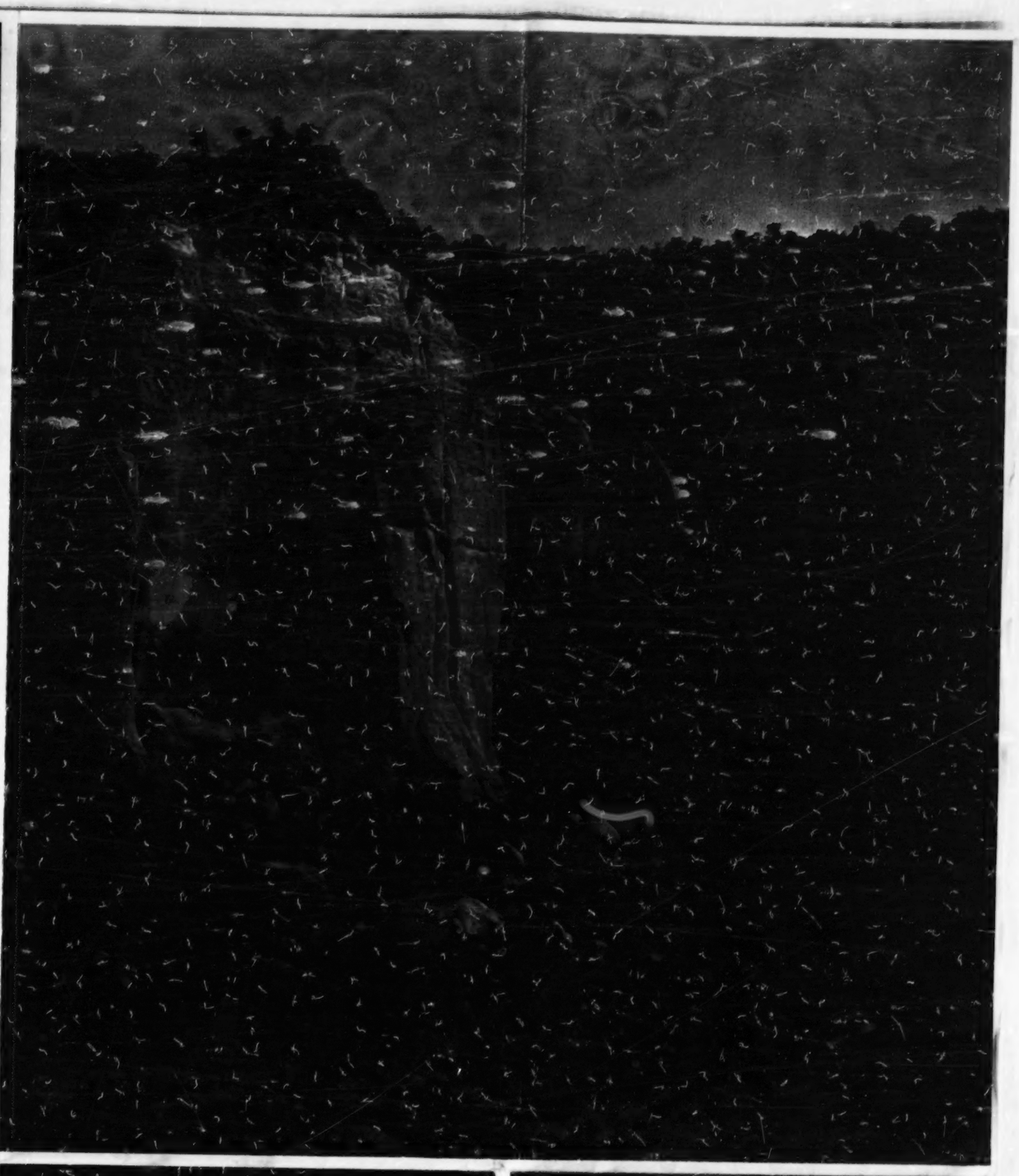
From the Overlook you can also see a series of distinct volcanic cinder cones looming above the ponderosa pine and pinyon-juniper woodlands west of the lava field. Collectively known as the Chain of Craters, these huge, symmetrical cinder cones stretch 20 miles from Bandera Crater southwest to Cerro Brillante. Bandera Crater is the largest cinder cone in El Malpais and is one of several tourist attractions to be seen at Ice Caves Resort. This is a privately owned commercial operation where, for a fee, you can hike up Bandera Crater, see an ice cave and other related volcanic features. Ice Caves Resort is located 25 miles south of I-40 on State Highway 53.

Between Cebollita Mesa and the Chain of Craters is the extensive lava field called El Malpais. Blanketed by a series of relatively recent lava flows, El Malpais contains a large number of beautiful volcanic features including some of the largest and most extensive lava tubes in the United States. Lava tubes, perhaps the most fascinating geologic phenomenon of El Malpais, were formed when the outer surface of a lava flow would cool and solidify over a still flowing river of molten lava. Tunnel-like caves were left when the lava river drained. At least eight lava tube systems occur in El Malpais, most of which are concentrated in the northwest portion of the area. Some of these volcanic structures are greater than 50 feet in diameter and are known to extend several miles in length. Several of the wider tubes have collapsed leaving narrow sections of roof forming impressive natural arches. Ice caves occur in a few of the lava tubes which are collapsed and sealed at one end. They contain delicate ice crystal ceilings, ice stalagmites and ice-rink-like floors kept intact by the relatively constant underground temperatures.

Visitor Information

— Keep vehicles on established roads and trails.
— Respect the rights and property of private landowners within the area. Do not damage buildings, fences, signs, gates or water developments. Do not disturb livestock.
— Please do not damage or cut down trees and other vegetation. Leave it for others to enjoy.
— Archaeological and historical sites found within El Malpais and adjacent public lands are protected under Federal law. Do not dig in sites or remove objects. Violators are subject to heavy fines and imprisonment.
— Always leave a clean camp and a dead fire.
— El Malpais is extremely rugged and water is scarce. For extended backcountry excursions, good physical condition is a must, along with careful planning and good equipment. It is advisable to carry plenty of food and water, a first aid kit, flashlight and map. Wear sturdy footgear and never travel alone. Leave word with a reliable person as to where you are traveling and when your party is expected to return. Compass readings are not accurate within El Malpais.
— Spring and fall are the most favorable seasons for hiking and backpacking. Backcountry travel during the summer and winter is strongly discouraged due to extreme temperature variations.
— In emergency situations remember that distress signals come in threes — whistles, shouts, gunshots, columns of smoke, flashes, etc., or three of anything that attracts attention.
— All inquiries for additional information on El Malpais should be directed to the Bureau of Land Management, Socorro District Office, 198 Neel Avenue NW, P.O. Box 1219, Socorro, NM 87801, Phone: (505) 835-0412.





Auto Touring

If your time is limited, State Road 117 is the best way to see El Malpais and the spectacular sandstone formations along the edge of Cebollita Mesa. A road log has been prepared for a 21-mile long segment of 117 to guide your exploration of this unique area. This is not a loop drive and you will need to retrace your route to return to I-40.

Milepoints

0.0 — The stop sign at the **junction** of I-40 and 117 marks the start of the tour. Check your odometer reading at this point. As you proceed south on 117 you can see the Upper McCarty's lava flow on your right. This is the youngest flow of El Malpais, as recent as 400 to 600 years in age. The Zuni Mountains rise more than 1,000 feet above the western edge of the lava field and the sandstone formations that lie east of 117 are part of La Ventana Ridge.

7.4 — The tree covered highland coming into view on your left is Cebollita Mesa. The mesa top is part of the **Acoma Indian Reservation.**

9.8 — Cattleguard, check your mileage.

10.0 — The turnoff to your right leads to **Sandstone Bluffs Overlook.** This vista point is a very popular area for picnicking, hiking and landscape photography. If you decide to camp at the Overlook, keep in mind that other visitors will use the site later. Please leave the area in as good or better condition than when you arrived.

12.5 — Cattleguard, check your mileage.

15.1 — The picturesque formation on your right is known as **La Vieja** (old woman) rock, a wind sculptured sandstone remnant that rises above El Malpais.

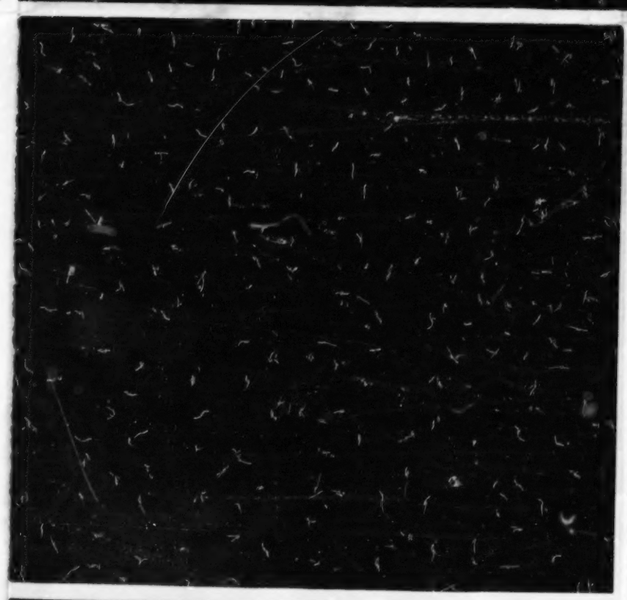
17.6 — The vehicle trail on your left leads to an area from which you can explore **La Ventana** (the window). This is the largest **natural arch** in New Mexico and a place of great natural beauty. Please help us keep it beautiful.

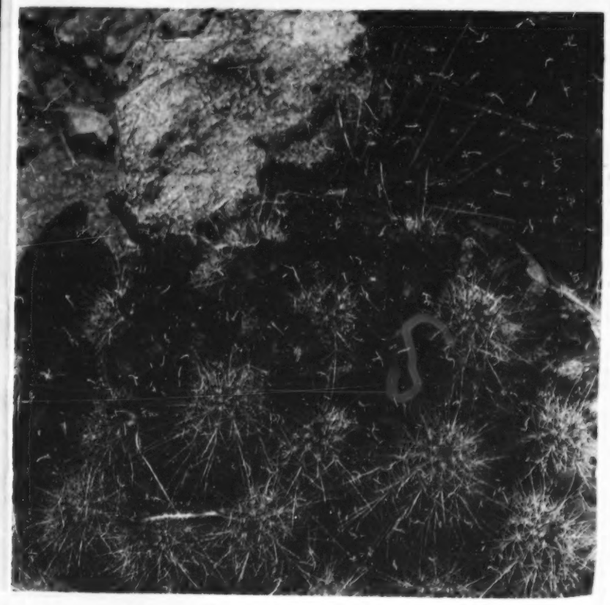
17.9 — This area is called the **Narrows** because the lava flowed almost to the base of the sandstone cliffs. These two very different environments offer excellent opportunities for hiking, rockclimbing, photography and sightseeing for geologic structures. Birds of prey, including golden eagles, red-tailed hawks, and prairie falcons inhabit the sandstone cliffs and frequently may be seen soaring high above them. Many other bird species use the cliffs and the pinyon-juniper woodlands for resident and transient quarters.

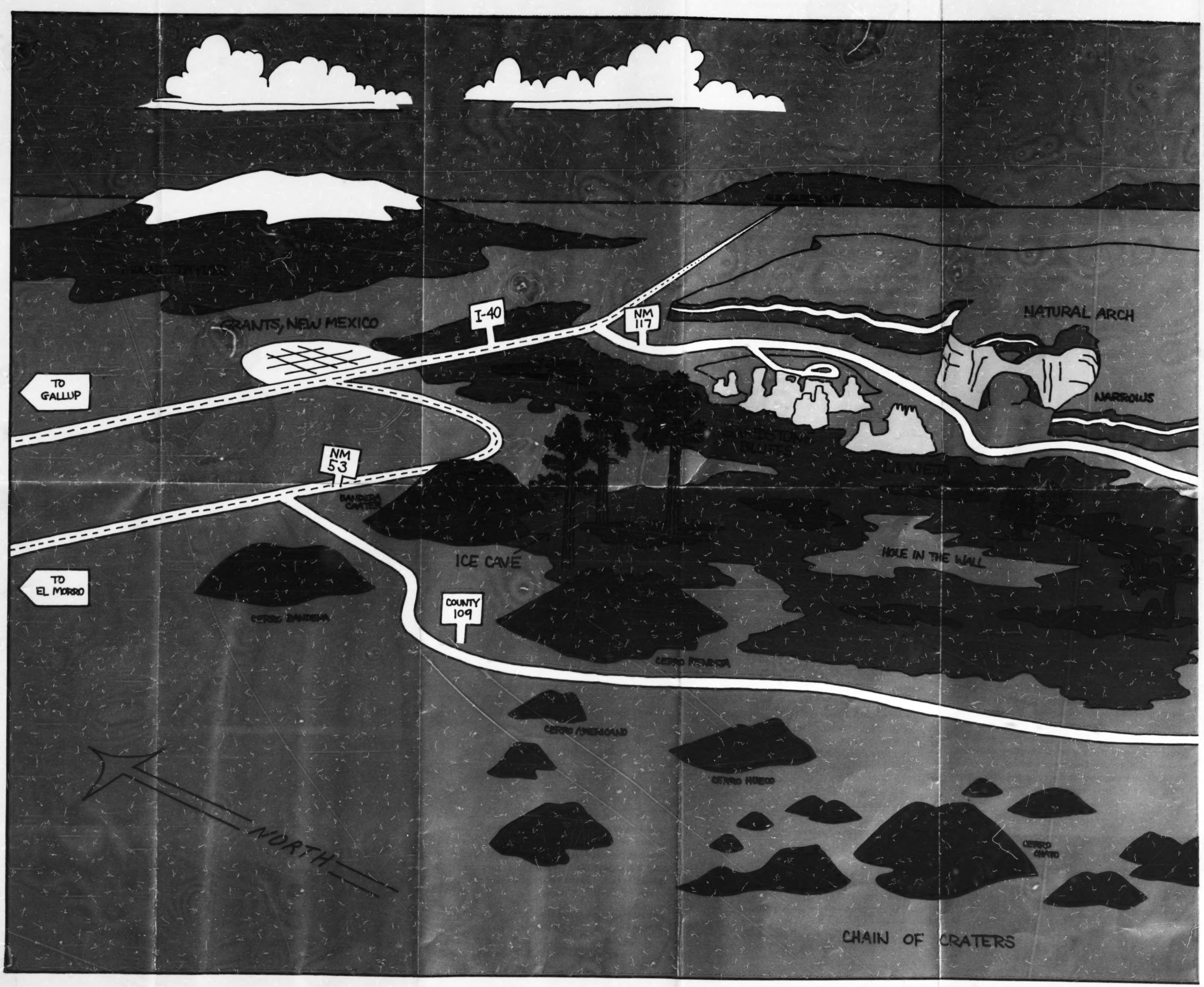
21.1 — This is the end of the auto tour. The vehicle trail on your left leads to a picnicking and camping area.

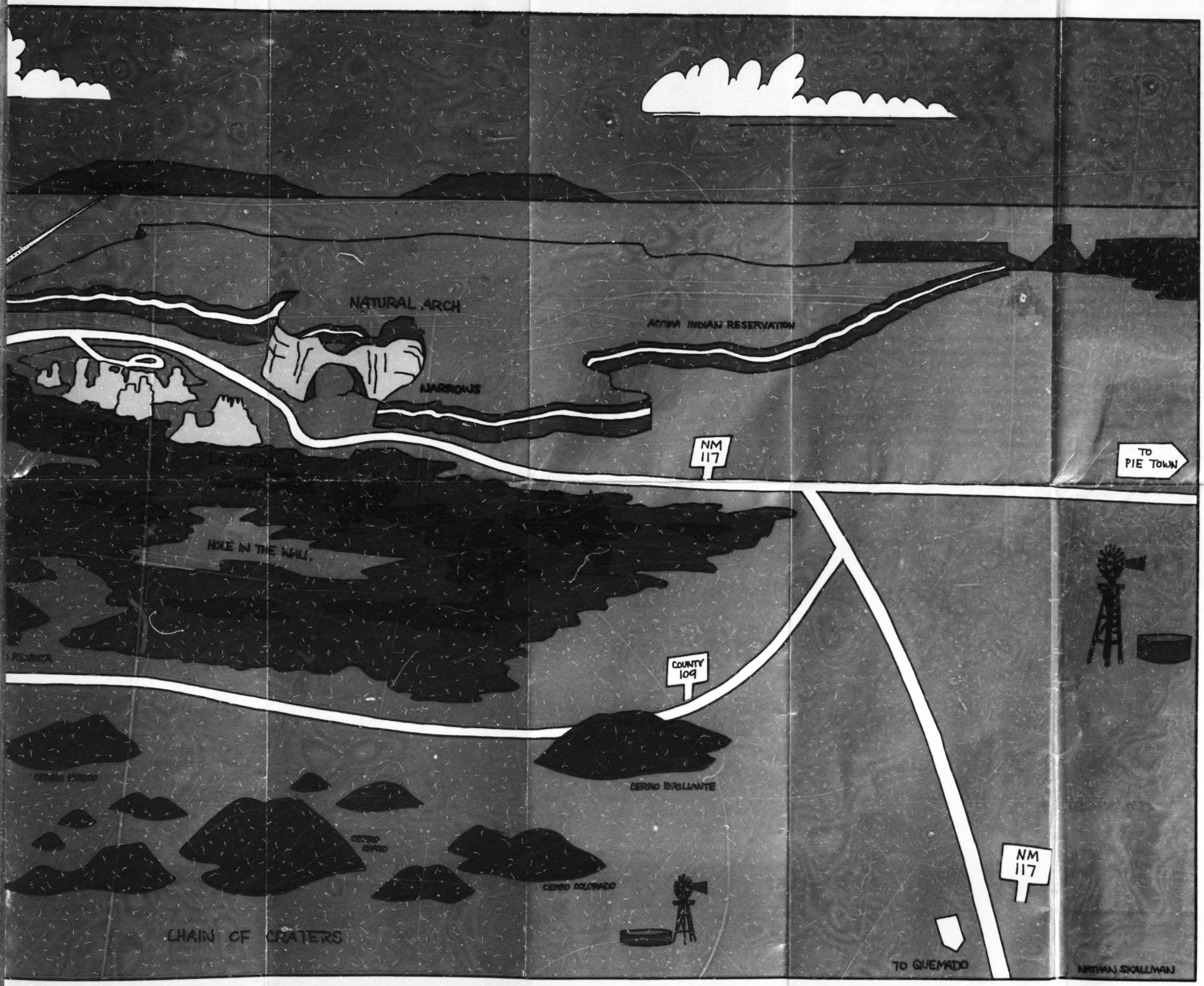
It should be noted that there are roads along the west side of El Malpais which lead into the Chain of Craters region and eventually reach State Highway 53. However, these access routes are not recommended as they are impassable in wet weather, unmarked and difficult to find without a good topographic map.

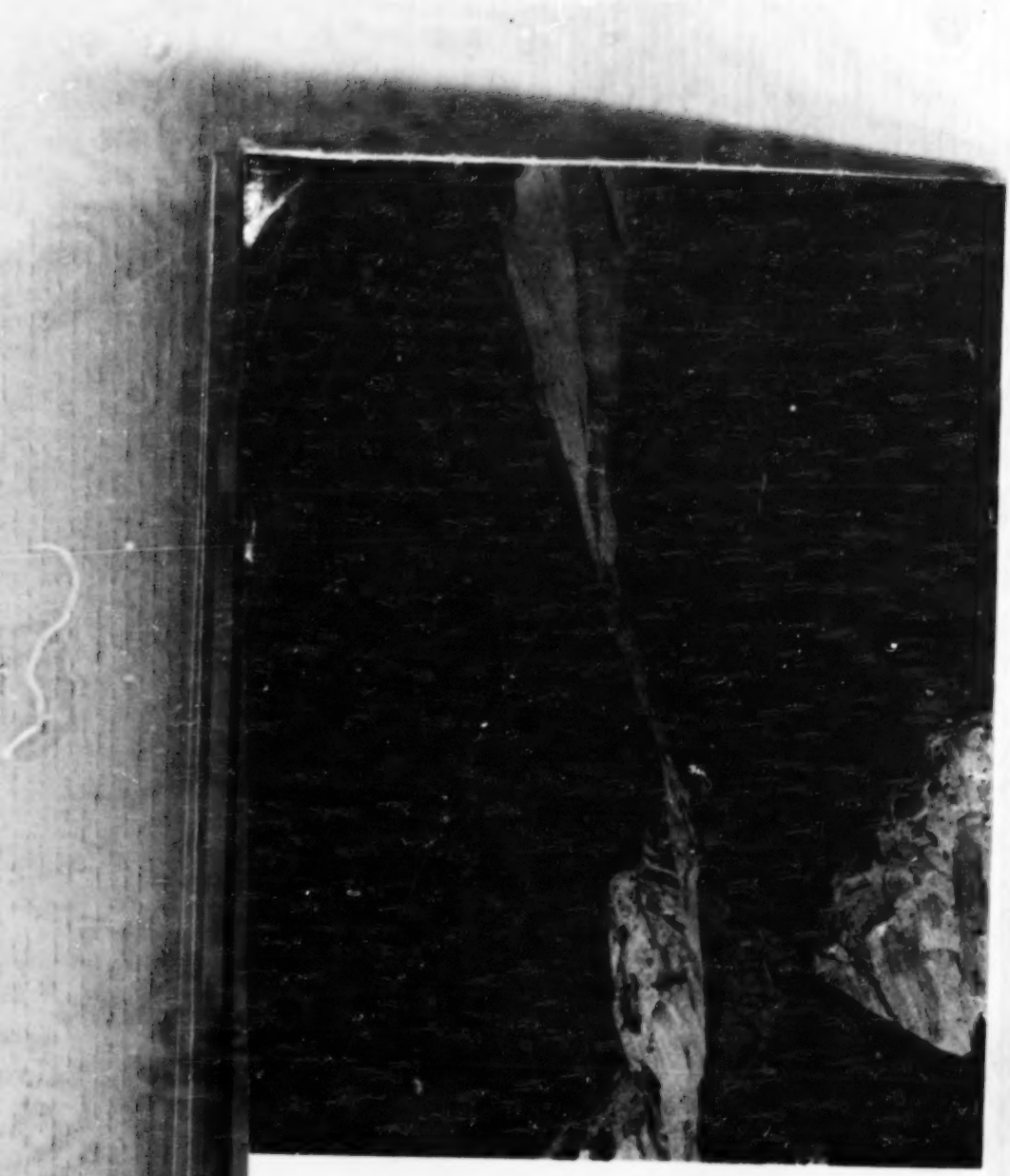
The information presented in this brochure has been compiled from many sources; we hope it will make your visit to El Malpais more enjoyable and meaningful. The reference map on the reverse is included to assist you in your tour of this unique region.






GRANTS, NEW MEXICO
I-40
NM 117
NATURAL ARCH
TO GALLUP
NM 53
BANDERA CRATER
ICE CAVE
COUNTY 109
HOLE IN THE WALL
TO EL MORRO
CERRO BANDERA
CERRO AMERICANO
CERRO HUECO
CERRO CHATO
NORTH
CHAIN OF CRATERS


NATURAL ARCH
NARROWS
ACOMA INDIAN RESERVATION
NM 117
TO PIE TOWN
HOLE IN THE WALL
COUNTY 109
CERRO BRILLANTE
CERRO NEGRO
CERRO CHATO
CERRO COLORADO
CHAIN OF CRATERS
TO QUEMADO
NM 117
NATHAN SKALLMAN



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